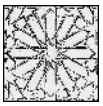

U

ULEMA

Literally "those who have knowledge" or "those who know" (singular *ʿalim*, plural *ʿulamaʾ*). The term is most widely used to refer to the scholarly class of Muslim societies, whose main occupation is the study of the texts that make up the Islamic Tradition (religious sciences such as Qurʾan, hadith, Qurʾanic commentary, jurisprudence, and theology, but also the applied sciences such as medicine, biology, astronomy, and mathematics). Members of the ulema class have also been called upon to act as advisors to rulers, or as *qadis* (judges) implementing the law (*shariʿa*) within Muslim societies. The authority of the ulema class in defining right doctrine and right practice within Islam has been immense in Muslim history.

In the early period (7th–9th centuries C.E.), a separate class of scholars concerned with the elaboration of knowledge (*ʿilm*) took some time to develop. Most historians date the emergence of a scholarly class to the early years of the Umayyad period, when Islamic doctrine was much debated. Debates concerning the constituent elements of faith (*iman*), or predestination (*qadr*), as well as the transmission of hadith (from the Prophet or other notable figures) and legal doctrine (*fiqh*) were the principal intellectual concerns of the emerging scholarly class. Many of the ulema also, it appears, participated in the opposition movements to the Umayyad caliphate. Some viewed them as deviating from true Islam in their leadership of the Muslim empire, and wished to put forward a more sophisticated religio-intellectual criticism of the Umayyads. It was, however, in the Abbasid period that the ulema began to gain both political influence and popular respect, as Abbasid caliphs and their wazirs sponsored institutional schools in which scholars could develop the intellectual foundations of Islam. It was early in this period that the ulema, with the support of some caliphs, became interested in the Greek tradition of philosophy and science, and works in languages other than Arabic began to be translated. These translations mark the beginnings of the incorporation of the applied sciences into the curriculum of learning, to complement the religious sciences, in which the ulema were already considered expert.

Once established, the ulema class became a fundamental element of Muslim societies. The expansion of the Muslim world, incorporating many different cultures and traditions, did not obviate the need for a scholarly class whose primary functions were to maintain the intellectual tradition and provide religious and scientific guidance to the population. Their fortunes waxed and waned depending on the receptivity of the dynasties to religious influence, but the vast majority of Muslim societies, both past and present, have included a class of scholars, usually given the generic name ulema.

The authority of the ulema in matters of doctrine and law has been definitive. The ulema themselves, though, have been divided on many issues, and hence should not be viewed as a unified group with common aims and intentions. An example of this division can be seen in the famous Inquisition, (*mihna*) from 829 onwards, when one group of scholars (the Muʿtazilis) persuaded the Abbasid caliph to persecute (and declare as heretics) scholars who did not adhere to the doctrine of "the created Qurʾan."

The authority and respect demanded by the ulema has usually been justified on the simple basis of a practical division of labor. Not all members of society have the time, the skills, or the inclination to dedicate their lives to the study necessary to determine right doctrine and practice. Hence, it is argued, a class of society that dedicates itself to this task should be instituted, and since these matters affect each individual's fate (both in this world and in the afterlife), the guidance of this class is of paramount importance. In the area of legal matters, this attitude was enshrined in the theory of *taqlid*, whereby the Muslim community is divided between scholars and those who follow the rulings of the scholars (typically called the *muqallid*s).

Apart from this practical justification for the ulema's authority, scholars also turned to the Qurʾan. Q. 4:59 states "Obey God, the Prophet and those in authority amongst you." Many Sunni scholars argued that "those in authority" probably refers to the ulema (some also included the political rulers in the category). Similarly, Q. 16:43: "Ask the people of remembrance if you do not know" was interpreted by Sunni scholars as exhorting the people to submit in matters of knowledge to the ulema. There were also convenient hadiths, traced back to the prophet Muhammad, which could be used to establish the ulema's status. For example, the well-known words attributed to the Prophet, "The ulema are the inheritors of the Prophets," was interpreted as implying that in religious authority, the ulema were given the responsibility of announcing the message of Islam to the community.

Although there were many scholars whose individual charismatic power is well attested, their authority was ultimately based on learning. The ulema deserved this respect, not because of lineage, or familial connections, or even because of individual piety and religiosity. Rather, the ulema were due respect because of they had undergone a particular type of training and education that elevated their understanding of religious matters above the ordinary populace. It was on this basis that the institution of the ulema became an indispensable part of Muslim culture.

In Muslim history, however, the respect due to the ulema did not translate into political power. Most scholars who wrote on the relationship between political power and religious authority accepted that the ulema were advisors who aided the ruler in the maintenance of the religion. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), for example, argued that the sultan should "exercise coercive power and have authority because the sultan is the representative of God," whereas the ulema were appointed by the sultan and given the responsibility of enacting the law. This theory of the dependence of the ulema upon the ruler for their practical authority in society reflected the relationship of the Sunni ulema with political power in historical terms. During the Ottoman Empire the ulema became an increasingly structured class of society, headed by the mufti, who advised the sultan on both religious and political issues, headed the judiciary, and controlled the religious education system in the empire. The situation was not dissimilar in the Indian Mogul Empire.

Al-Ghazali's influential formulation of the sultan-ulema relationship can be informatively contrasted with the views of Shiʿite groups. Some Shiʿite groups, particularly the Ismaʿilis in the medieval period, saw religious authority and political power conjoined in an individual, who was given the title imam. The need for a class of religious scholars who advised the imam was reduced, since the imam was, himself, blessed in a mystical manner with knowledge of doctrinal and legal matters. Twelver Shiʿites also placed an imam at the apex of the ideal political system, but believed that the imam had gone into hiding (*ghayba*). Since there was no ideal political leader other than this missing imam, Twelver Shiʿites were greatly concerned with the issue of community authority. A theory of "delegation" (*niyaba*) was therefore needed. The Twelver Shiʿites recognized a succession of Twelve Imams after the death of the Prophet. Only the first of these, Imam ʿAli, had succeeded in gaining political power, and the last of these had gone into hiding. Reports from a number of these Twelve Imams were interpreted to indicate that the imams had delegated leadership of the community to the ulema in the absence of the Imam.

In works of *fiqh*, one sees a gradual expansion of the ulema's role in areas that, in early Twelver Shiʿism, were seen as the prerogative of the Imam. This position faced a serious challenge when the Safavid mystical order came to power in Iran in 1501. The first Safavid Shah, Ismaʿil, declared Twelver Shiʿism to be the state religion. Jurists either devised means whereby the shah might be considered a legitimate ruler, despite the absence of the true ruler (the imam) or they rejected association with the Safavids and maintained the ultimate authority of the ulema.

The debate over the role of the ulema in the life of the Muslim community has become more acute in the modern period. In Twelver Shiʿism, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini argued that the ulema should rule the Muslim community until the return of the Hidden Imam, a theory he had the opportunity to put into practice following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. In the modern Sunni Muslim world, on the other hand, one can recognize a variety of trends. Many Sunni Muslim governments have used members of the ulema to brand their government as religious in a manner reminiscent of the medieval period. In the revivalist movements, however, one sees a reaction against the ulema, who often are characterized as obscurantist and pedantic, worrying about matters of religious technicalities, rather than the more important issues of preserving Muslim identity in the face of non-Muslim imperialism. The popularist commentaries on the Qurʾan of, for example, Sayyid Qutb or Abu l-Aʿlaʾ Maududi, represent a rejection of the ulemas and an exhortation to "the people" to approach the divine text without the encumbrance of the scholarly tradition of learning.

This rejection of the ulema's authority in matters of religion is likely to increase as literacy and the availability of foundational texts of Islam become more widespread in the Muslim world. In some Muslim countries, however, one sees the re-emergence of the ulema as active political agents, working for change. Two examples of this are Saudi Arabia and Morocco. In the recent past, Saudi ulema have challenged the concentration of power in the person of the king and his royal family. Attempts continue to be made to diffuse this power to a larger body, within which the ulema would

play a larger role. In Morocco, legal scholars such as Muhammad ʿAllal al-Fasi have been at the forefront of the modernization of Islamic law. Al-Fasi and others are responsible for the production of an intellectual movement in which the *shariʿa* is considered more responsive to the needs of a society changing under the influence of new technology and science. The ulema have, then, at different times been loathed and loved by the political establishment. However, their participation in the institutions of power remains an essential component of any Muslim political system wishing to call itself "Islamic."

See also **Knowledge; Law; Madrasa; Qadi (Kadi, Kazi); Shariʿa; Shiʿa: Imami (Twelver); Shiʿa: Ismaʿili; Succession.**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ephrat, Daphna. *A Learned Society in Transition: The Sunni Ulama of Eleventh Century Baghdad.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Makdisi, George. *Religion Law and Learning in Classical Islam.* Hampshire, U.K.: Variorum Reprints, 1991.

Momen, Moojan. *Introduction to Shiʿite Islam.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985.

Robert Gleave

ʿUMAR (C. 581–644)

ʿUmar b. al-Khattab al-ʿAdawi al-Qurashi, an early Meccan companion of the prophet Muhammad, became the Prophet's second successor and is usually viewed as having done much to establish the foundations of the caliphal state. At first opposed to Islam, ʿUmar embraced it circa 615 in a reversal cherished and dramatized by tradition. Like Abu Bakr, with whom he was closely associated, ʿUmar married a daughter of the Prophet in 625. Because of his strong personality, a motif frequently noted in the sources, he gained considerable influence. At the death of the Prophet in 632, he helped Abu Bakr to be elected as successor, and Abu Bakr in turn appointed ʿUmar to succeed him two years later.

On taking office, ʿUmar placed the new caliphal state on firmer footing. He assumed the new title of Commander of the Believers (*amir al-muʾminin*), thus making clear his superior authority. He continued the campaign started by Abu Bakr to expand the caliphate outside of Arabia. Under his rule, Syria (636), Iraq (637), Egypt (639–642), and western Iran (641–643) all came under Muslim rule, a transformation that greatly altered the nature of the state. Internally, he organized the state over a much larger area, founded new cities, and distributed offices more widely among the various Arabian tribes, thereby moving away from Abu Bakr's favoritism for the Quraysh.

See also **Caliphate; Law; Succession.**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kennedy, Hugh. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century.* London: Longman, 1986.

Madelung, Wilfred. *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Khalid Yahya Blankinship

UMAYYID *See* Empires: Umayyad; Muʿawiya

UMMA

The term *umma* is an Arabic word. It was used sixty-two times in the Qurʾan, in both the Meccan and Medinan periods. Its most common meaning is that of a group of people or a community, and it also refers to a religious community or a group of people who follow God's guidance. Most usages of *umma* in the Qurʾan, however, are not related to the community of prophet Muhammad.

The concept of a community of believers (*umma*) took shape during the Prophet's lifetime, first in Mecca then in Medina. In Mecca, the small group of the Prophet's followers shared certain common beliefs, values, and practices associated with the new religion, Islam, and gradually came to be differentiated from the rest of the Meccans. Meccan families were split; some followed the traditional religion of Mecca (paganism) while others followed the new religion. Religious affiliation became more important than family relationship or tribal membership. When the Prophet and his small group of followers fled Mecca to Medina, they formed, with the Muslims of Medina, a distinct community (*umma*) as opposed to, for instance, the Jewish community there. By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 C.E., his followers, known as "believers" or Muslims, had a distinct identity. The early struggle of this community with non-Muslims, either in the general Arab rebellion (632–633) against Muslim rule from Medina, or, after that, with the Byzantine and Sassanid empires in the wars of conquest, led to a sharper view of what the Muslim *umma* was; that is, it was based on belief in one